

# 1 **Crisis Translation: Considering Language Needs in Multilingual**

## 2 **Disaster Settings**

### 3 **Abstract**

4 **Purpose:** The purpose of this conceptual paper is to highlight the role that language  
5 translation can play in disaster prevention and management and to make the case for  
6 increased attention to language translation in crisis communication.

7 **Approach:** The article draws on literature relating to disaster management to suggest  
8 that translation is a perennial issue in crisis communication.

9 **Findings:** Although communication with multicultural and multilinguistic communities  
10 is seen as being in urgent need of attention, we find that the role of translation in  
11 enabling this is underestimated, if not unrecognised.

12 **Value:** This article raises awareness of the need for urgent attention to be given by  
13 scholars and practitioners to the role of translation in crisis communication.

14 **Keywords:** crisis communication; translation and interpreting; emergency response;  
15 cross-cultural barriers; linguistic vulnerability

16

### 17 **Introduction**

18 Much as the world is interconnected and globalized in terms of communication, the  
19 breadth of social and economic impact of communication in multilingual, transborder as  
20 well as national crises remains understudied (Federici, 2016). Long-lasting crises can  
21 erupt within multicultural cities (e.g. the 2017 Grenfell Tower fire in London), a region  
22 (the 2017 earthquake in Mexico), a nation (the 2011 Great East Japan earthquake, or the  
23 2010 Haiti earthquake), or across borders between multiple countries (the 2004 Boxing  
24 Day Tsunami across 18 countries in the Indian Ocean). Triggered by natural hazards, or

25 teleological motivations – human-driven disasters, including terrorism and conflict  
26 (Glade and Alexander, 2016) – happen within multilingual and multicultural societies  
27 (Cadwell, 2014; Cadwell and O’Brien, 2016; O’Brien and Cadwell, 2017). Increased  
28 people displacement and economic migrations across the world causes major concerns  
29 for migrants’ adaptability to disasters in their new contexts. Although displaced  
30 populations can be resilient because of their past experiences (Guadagno *et al.*, 2017;  
31 Khan and McNamara, 2017; MICIC, 2016), at the same time they can be exposed to  
32 new vulnerabilities in their new environments with limited access to information  
33 (Puthooppambil and Parente, 2018). Language plays a role in both cross-boundary  
34 and local settings. Local crises in multilingual societies equally have implications for  
35 temporary or long-term residents with limited proficiency in the local language – an  
36 example: translations into 18 languages were needed after the Grenfell Tower fire.  
37 Thus, from indigenous populations to (un)integrated migrants, to tourists or business  
38 travellers, any crisis can cascade into multiple, diverse, and interrelated temporal,  
39 cultural, linguistic and geographical dimensions (Pescaroli and Alexander, 2015).  
40 Consequently, language translation is required.

41 Training for internationally-coordinated responses to crises (Howe *et al.*, 2013)  
42 and collecting data from disasters (Mulder *et al.*, 2016) also happen in multilingual  
43 environments, where the lingua franca (the English language of international  
44 humanitarian institutions) is both a solution and part of the problem. Overreliance on  
45 everybody’s (degrees of) competence in English delays engaging with the ‘perennial  
46 issue’ of crisis communication among international responders (Crowley and Chan,  
47 2011, p. 24) and with crisis-affected communities (New Zealand Government, 2013).

48 In this article, we make the case for increased attention to language translation in  
49 crisis communication. Translation is here intended as linguistic and cultural transfer

50 from one language into another, be it through oral, signing, written, or multimodal  
51 channels. We show how, in spite of some progress, the literature that deals with the  
52 multilingual nature of crisis situations is limited in fields where it should thrive, such as  
53 in crisis communication and in translation studies. Despite the central role attributed to  
54 efficient communication in disaster risk reduction (henceforth DRR), our current ability  
55 to plan and deliver multilingual information in crises is in fact hindered by the focus on  
56 language needs that is predominantly limited to considering, dealing, or resolving  
57 language issues in the response phase. We propose a shift of focus towards considering  
58 language translation as *part of* disaster prevention and management. Embedded in  
59 debates on planning, preparedness, training, and mitigation, language translation aligns  
60 with the recent call to consider communication of crucial and timely information in  
61 crisis management as a human right (Greenwood *et al.*, 2017). Yet, as the cursory  
62 evidence on how the multilingual communication issues are studied so far shows this  
63 right goes currently unnoticed, or gets very limited attention, at best.

#### 64 **What is Crisis Translation?**

65 Communication mediated by professional and ad-hoc linguists (be they translators or  
66 interpreters) is a complex form of communication. Prior to explaining the proposed  
67 conceptualisation of crisis translation, it is necessary to scope what is meant by  
68 ‘translation’ and ‘crisis’, as used in this article. We propose a broad conceptualisation of  
69 crisis translation as a specific form of communication that overlaps with principles of  
70 risk communication (CDC, 2008, 2014; Reynolds and Seeger, 2014) as much as with  
71 principles of emergency planning and management (Alexander, 2002; 2016b).

72 Over the last decades, the recognition that any disruptive event has cascading effects  
73 has become significant. As issues in multilingual communication exist before, during,  
74 and after any emergency or disaster, an awareness of cascading effects over the long-

75 term and beyond the geographical location of the event is a *conditio sine qua non* to  
76 consider definitions of crisis that account for the interconnectedness of the 21st-century  
77 world. Pescaroli and Alexander’s definition of ‘cascading disasters’ (2015), which  
78 connects crisis as a threatening condition with disasters as triggering events of different  
79 magnitude and duration, shapes our definition of crisis. In particular, Pescaroli and  
80 Alexander (2015, p. 62) integrate and sharpen the UN Office for Disaster Risk  
81 Reduction terminology by emphasizing ‘that cascades are events that depend, to some  
82 extent, on their context, and thus their diffusion is associated with enduring  
83 vulnerabilities’. It is noteworthy, however, that the UN perceives language translation  
84 as a matter of ‘services’. For instance, the *Disaster Assessment and Coordination Field*  
85 *Handbook* (UNDAC, 2018) in the workflow of its On-Site Operations Coordination  
86 Centre for disaster management includes in one of its checklists for crisis  
87 communication “procurement of translation/interpretation services” (UNDAC 2018, p.  
88 17). This positive awareness of need clashes with the reality that such services may  
89 exist professionally in very limited scope, translators and interpreters are not trained in  
90 the many language pairs that may be required, and local languages, dialects, minority  
91 languages, and low/no literacy communities are less served than lingua franca or  
92 ‘international’ languages. The lack of appropriate linguistic and cultural awareness in  
93 crisis communication may lead to catastrophic consequences, which could be avoidable  
94 and for this reason we position this lack within the ‘cascading disaster’ paradigm.  
95 Problems of translation leading to inappropriate evacuations (e.g. Field, 2017) or  
96 cultural presumptions leading to further infection in displaced and local populations in  
97 the 2014 Ebola outbreak (e.g. Bastide, 2018) show that inadequate planning for  
98 language translation provision leads to vulnerability.

99           The UN defines as vulnerabilities ‘the conditions determined by physical, social,  
100 economic and environmental factors or processes which increase the susceptibility of an  
101 individual, a community, assets or systems to the impacts of hazards.’<sup>1</sup> Vulnerabilities  
102 also depend on cultural perceptions of risk and whether cultural backgrounds align with  
103 the international (often Anglophone) concepts of preparedness and risk reduction (see  
104 discussions in Blaikie *et al.*, 2004; Krüger *et al.*, 2015). Lack of integration, lack of  
105 participation, lack of access to information represent vulnerabilities for Culturally and  
106 Linguistically Diverse (CALD) communities. Translation would mitigate some of these  
107 pre-existing vulnerabilities, but as Grin (2017, p. 156) puts it ‘[t]ranslation sometimes  
108 evokes the image of a Cinderella confined to humble domestic chores while her elder  
109 sisters, that is, communication strategies like “lingua franca” and second/foreign  
110 language learning, enjoy all the attention and visibility’. The consequences of these are  
111 highlighted in the recent IFRC *World Disasters Report 2018*:

112           Speakers of minority languages who are not fluent in the official national  
113 language(s) are at a structural disadvantage in many countries. [...] However  
114 linguistically diverse the affected population, humanitarian responses are usually  
115 coordinated in international lingua francas and delivered in a narrow range of  
116 national languages. (IFRC, 2018, p. 103)

117 As a result, language translation rarely, if ever, features among plans to increase  
118 resilience but its absence increases the cascading effects of crises. Pescaroli and  
119 Alexander’s definition of ‘cascading disasters’ (2015, pp. 64-65) underpins a notion of  
120 ‘crisis’ that persuades us that research into translation and its effects on communication  
121 in crisis management is much needed. Poor or culturally inappropriate communication  
122 undermines trust in responders and institutions. Failure to address effective  
123 communication for CALD communities generates further social disruption, one of the  
124 cascading effects. This, in turn, risks affecting and endangering respondents who may

125 deal with crisis-affected populations because their lack of understanding or their cultural  
126 mindset make them appear as non-collaborative. Thus, crisis translation considers  
127 language barriers in the context of multi-dimensional cascading effects that widen  
128 existing vulnerabilities or engender new ones by means of miscommunication.

129         As mentioned earlier, ‘translation’ here refers to all modes, oral, written, signed,  
130 and multimodal that could be used for communication in preparation and response, as  
131 well as for recovery from a crisis. Hence, ‘translation’ includes the oral task of  
132 ‘interpreting’. For those outside the academic and professional domain of translation,  
133 debates about the different skills required from translators and interpreters are largely  
134 unknown and ‘translation’ is the term used generally to mean the transfer of meaning  
135 and cultural encodings from one language/cultural system to another regardless of the  
136 channel of communication (e.g. the Harvard Humanitarian Initiative heading  
137 ‘translation: the perennial hidden issue’ concerns in fact a question of interpreting).  
138 Moreover, an individual may act as a translator of written content in one instance and an  
139 interpreter of oral content in another. This is especially the case in crisis situations. The  
140 term ‘translator’ is usually reserved in academia and in the translation professions  
141 (Gouadec, 2007) for those who are ‘qualified’ to act through training and/or experience.  
142 However, in a crisis situation, a ‘translator’ might be any person who can mediate  
143 between two or more language and culture systems, without specific training or  
144 qualifications (Federici and Cadwell, 2018; O'Brien and Cadwell, 2017). A translator  
145 might even be a young refugee (see Marlowe and Bogen, 2015; Melandri *et al.*, 2014).  
146 This loose definition of a translator is not a comfortable one for those who work in the  
147 translation professions or in the related academic discipline. Nonetheless, when people  
148 are faced with a crisis, the luxury of a trained professional is often just that – an  
149 unattainable luxury. We recognize that translation is carried out by many different

150 people in crisis situations; that it is sometimes oral, sometimes written, and sometimes  
151 highly multimodal; that the translator is sometimes a trained professional and  
152 sometimes not, sometimes an adult, sometimes a child, that translators do not just  
153 transfer linguistic information, but also act, very importantly, as cultural mediators.  
154 Take this state of affairs and add to it the lack of trained translators and interpreters who  
155 are available to work in a crisis, the lack of funding for communication, never mind  
156 translation, the urgency that is associated with core phases of crises (response and  
157 recovery), and the potential power of volunteers, it is necessary to adopt a broad  
158 definition of ‘translation’ and ‘translator’.

### 159 **Growing Recognition of the Need**

160 We do not wish to give the impression that translation is entirely overlooked in  
161 commentaries or policies on crisis communication. At the Sendai implementation  
162 conference in 2016, translation and interpreting were discussed in the context of  
163 capacity building for disaster risk reduction (Aitsi-Selmi et al., 2016). The GDACS  
164 (Global Disaster Alert Coordination System<sup>ii</sup>) guidelines for international exchange in  
165 disasters mentions translators once, but they are listed in the company of the following  
166 information exchange responsibilities of the affected country: ‘transport, fuel/lubricants,  
167 translators, warehouses, maps, etc. The *Sphere Handbook* (2018: p. 71), under  
168 commitment 6 on information sharing in humanitarian response, includes two explicit  
169 communicative obligations: ‘Communicate clearly and avoid jargon and colloquialisms,  
170 especially when other participants do not speak the same language. Provide interpreters  
171 and translators if needed’.

172 Cadwell (2015) and Cadwell and O’Brien (2016) investigate the use and  
173 potential of translation technology in crisis situations. Somewhat surprisingly, it was  
174 found that industry-standard and commercial translation tools such as translation

175 memory, terminology databases, and machine translation (i.e. MT – fully automatic  
176 translation) played an insignificant role for foreign nationals affected by the Great East  
177 Japan Earthquake. Since then, the potential of translation technology to assist in crisis  
178 situations has been growing (see O’Brien – forthcoming - for a discussion). Having  
179 crisis terminology online is of course useful, but accessibility in times of crisis for all  
180 the potential actors has not been critically appraised and ways of building and sharing  
181 translation databases, for example, by and for volunteers goes largely unassessed, as  
182 does the utility of such databases for the training of machine translation engines.

183         Initial strides for inclusion of translation technologies in response to crisis comes  
184 from the NGO Translators without Borders (TWB). It has played a leading role in  
185 having translation recognized and implemented as part of humanitarian aid in the past  
186 number of years, including pioneering work to train crisis translators (O'Brien, 2016).  
187 Their Words of Relief project aims to translate crisis messages into 15 world languages,  
188 build a spider network of diaspora who can translate, and create a crowd-sourced  
189 application that connects aid workers and data aggregators in an emergency. In addition,  
190 TWB partnered with Microsoft to push forward crucial work in machine translation  
191 (Crisis MT, see Lewis, 2010; Lewis *et al.*, 2011) and their operations office in Kenya  
192 stimulated a first study on comprehension of translated information about Ebola among  
193 Kenyans.

#### 194 **Yet, Translation is Mostly Ignored**

195 In spite of these seedling developments, translation as a facilitator of crisis information  
196 is mostly overlooked. In 2018, the ‘Multi-Hazard Early Warning System: A Checklist’  
197 (WMO, 2018) shows how awareness about cultural and linguistic differences remains  
198 very limited. Even though the checklist responds to the purpose of the Sendai  
199 Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction 2015-2030 (UNISDR, 2015) so as to attain



200 ‘the substantial reduction of disaster risk and losses in lives, livelihoods and health and  
201 in the economic, physical, social, cultural and environmental assets of persons,  
202 businesses, communities, and countries,’ the checklist remarkably excludes language  
203 obstacles to effective communication. Linguistic diversity is the status quo in most  
204 countries world-wide. However, ‘language’ is often conflated with the concept of  
205 ‘culture’ and the implicit assumption seems to be that if cultural diversity is noted,  
206 translation will somehow happen; many international documents, including influential  
207 documents such as this checklist, are redacted in one of the 7 official languages of the  
208 UN, whilst 7,111 languages are currently actual use (*Ethnologue*, 2019)<sup>1</sup>. Yet languages  
209 such as Hindi, the 4<sup>th</sup> largest for native speakers and 3<sup>rd</sup> largest for overall number, are  
210 not included among the official languages. It is tempting to argue that considerations  
211 about linguistic diversity recede before prestige and power of *lingua francas*. Moreover,  
212 translation costs money, which may not abound in crisis response. It also requires  
213 forward planning. For example, establishing a database of approved translators and  
214 interpreters for specific language pairs, knowing their expertise, their availability etc.  
215 As a result of these and possibly other factors, the fact that linguistic diversity comes  
216 with translation needs in cross-boundary crises remains underestimated.

217         It is unclear who has ownership of provision for effective communication in a  
218 language that is understood by the recipients of crisis information. The document  
219 dedicated to early-warning signals does not suggest that a specific responder (person or  
220 institution) should deal with the logistical difficulties of accommodating language  
221 differences when communicating risks with the purpose of mitigating its impact. CALD  
222 communities and their needs are listed; they are included in checks for assessment of

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<sup>1</sup> Source: <https://www.ethnologue.com/guides/how-many-languages>, accessed: 26 June 2019.

223 'exposure, vulnerabilities, capacities, and risks' (p.10) where the checklist includes a  
224 box for 'legislation and cultural norms assessed to identify gaps that may increase  
225 vulnerability.' Though cultural diversity is listed, it does not follow automatically that  
226 language needs are either included or taken care of, as mentioned above. The focus,  
227 rather, seems to be on cultural and behavioral norms, but not on language access.

228 Further, in the extensive body of literature on crisis or disaster management,  
229 with its intrinsic terminological debates on what disaster management entails (Fischer,  
230 2008; Haddow *et al.*, 2011; Thomas *et al.*, 2013; Wall and Chery, 2011; Waugh, 2007),  
231 or in the charter of humanitarian response of The Sphere Project (2011; as seen some  
232 more commitment appears in the 2018 edition), the common denominator appears to be  
233 that multilingual communication issues are considered sporadically, and only recently  
234 have they acquired limited visibility. In some of this literature, the strategic importance  
235 of communication, or information as aid, is highlighted (Fischer, 2008; Isiolo, 2012;  
236 Santos-Hernández and Hearn Morrow, 2013; Seeger, 2006; WHO, 2012). In  
237 international and European protocols or roadmaps on crisis or emergency management,  
238 recommendations on clear communication with crisis-affected communities form a core  
239 element yet they do not mention translation (DG-ECHO, 2013; EC, 2014, 2017). A  
240 recent institutional commitment from the United Nations High Commission for  
241 Refugees has one formal commitment about access to information – to address  
242 migration crises:

243 Therefore, we need to maintain continuous communication with communities,  
244 using languages, formats, and media that are contextually appropriate and  
245 accessible for all groups in a community, including children and persons with  
246 disabilities. (UNHCR, 2018, p. 8)

247 It is, at best however, a general statement of principle.

248           The EU's General Guidelines for Operational Priorities on Humanitarian Aid  
249 signalled the importance of communicating transparently about disasters (EC, 2014) and  
250 recently introduced an economic argument in favor of risk reduction and prevention that  
251 applies to considering translation as a tool to better inform and educate for prevention:  
252 'We know that investment in prevention saves lives and livelihoods; it needs therefore  
253 efficient targeting to disaster risks' (EC, 2017, section 2). These goals sit alongside the  
254 rights-based notion that whatever the status of one's spoken language (Mowbray, 2017),  
255 information in a crisis is a fundamental human right (Greenwood *et al.*, 2017; O'Brien  
256 *et al.*, 2018).

257           Some of these commentators have provided evidence of negative consequences  
258 when crisis communication does not work, especially when communication is in a  
259 second or third language for the crisis-affected communities, or in a language they do  
260 not understand at all. The pivotal work, previously mentioned, Disaster Relief 2.0,  
261 published by Harvard Humanitarian Initiative (Crowley and Chan, 2011), using the  
262 Haiti Earthquake example, argues for increased cooperation and dialogue between  
263 humanitarian agencies and the technical and linguistic volunteers spread around the  
264 globe who help process the communication generated by the disaster-affected  
265 communities. It also called for deeper interactions in future disasters between those  
266 responding to and those experiencing a disaster; eight years on and this issue is still  
267 relevant as it remains unaddressed (Cook *et al.*, 2016).

268           Moser-Mercer *et al.* (2014, p. 141) confirm this point: 'Surprisingly, language  
269 needs of large-scale humanitarian actions and deployments are rarely voiced, often  
270 downplayed and at best indirectly stated.' To provide additional concrete examples,  
271 Haddow *et al.* (2011) in their *Introduction to Emergency Management*, list five critical  
272 assumptions for a successful crisis communications strategy: (1) customer focus; (2)

273 leadership commitment; (3) the inclusion of communications and planning in  
274 operations; (4) situational awareness; and (5) media partnership. The audience and  
275 customers of crisis information are listed as the general public, victims, the business  
276 community, media, elected officials, community officials and volunteer groups (i.e. a  
277 diverse group). It cannot be assumed that all these people share equal competencies in  
278 the same language, so translation is a necessity. Yet, nowhere is translation mentioned  
279 in this volume.

280           The DG ECHO Disaster Risk Reduction Policy Document discusses the  
281 importance of inclusive information and communication and mentions in particular that  
282 information should be ‘accessible for all’ (DG-ECHO, 2013, p. 41). This document also  
283 mentions strengthening resilience through timely exchange of information. However,  
284 making information accessible by either simplifying it for those with limited proficiency  
285 in a lingua franca, or translating it is only mentioned very briefly (‘briefing of  
286 colleagues and translation in practice’).

287           In his discussion on lessons learned from previous disasters, Fischer (2008, p.  
288 217) notes that

289           instructions for obtaining medical assistance and subsistence supplies as well as  
290 instructions for an evacuation or a quarantine are more likely to be responded to if  
291 they are frequently repeated, articulated clearly and with specificity. All too often  
292 emergency personnel assume that because the information was disseminated, the  
293 intended recipients have received it, understood it, and responded to it in the  
294 desired fashion. Nothing could be further from the truth.

295 This statement reminds us that communicating one way is insufficient, but the author  
296 fails to note that, for communication to be effective, it does not only have to meet the  
297 requirements listed above, but should be delivered in a language that is comprehended  
298 by those who need that communication. Retention, understanding, and desire for

299 information in specific modes or formats by affected populations are excluded from this  
300 equation, with the risk of one-directional forms of communication (for an illustration,  
301 see O'Brien and Cadwell, 2017).

302 In his 2006 article on best practices in crisis communication, Seeger lists ten  
303 best practices on crisis communication generated from research literature. Due to space  
304 constraints, we do not list them all here, but emphasize practice number (8), given its  
305 significance for ethical crisis communication: communicate with compassion, concern,  
306 and empathy. None of the 'best practices', not even (8), recognize the role of  
307 multilingual communication through translation.

308 Access to compassionate speakers of one's language represented a powerful  
309 resource for refugees caught in the aftermath of the 2010 and 2011 earthquakes in New  
310 Zealand (Christchurch and Canterbury), but it was acknowledged that improvements in  
311 communicating with culturally and linguistically diverse communities was required  
312 (New Zealand Government, 2013). As a final example, even Santos Hernández and  
313 Morrow (2013) who focus on language and literacy as factors in successful crisis  
314 communication, acknowledge the importance of readability using typical measures such  
315 as SMOG and Flesch-Kincaid, but fail to mention translation or interpreting. In  
316 summary, there are ample examples of a considerable lacuna for the role and need for  
317 translation in academic, governmental, and non-governmental discourse on crisis  
318 communication.

### 319 **Crisis Translation and Emergency Planning**

320 We intend to demonstrate that in the context of DRR and crisis management alike,  
321 additional focus on the language barrier would greatly contribute to community-led  
322 initiatives to mitigate risks (Gaillard, 2010; Mercer *et al.*, 2012; Shaw, 2012; Tabatabaei  
323 *et al.*, 2013). Language translation is a significant problem in the response phase of

324 disasters, as deploying language specialists in combinations that are difficult to predict  
325 in advance is an expensive and logistically challenging task; as we mentioned  
326 previously, interpreters and translators for the needed language combinations may not  
327 be available, fully trained, or even exist. It is likely to remain an impossible task to  
328 complete if the focus remains only on the response phase. In order to deploy interpreters  
329 or provide information in languages that reach the affected communities, translators and  
330 interpreters must be available. Professional translators are rare in many language  
331 combinations, so bilingual staff of NGOs double up as translators and interpreters. This  
332 role is frequently imposed on such staff, on top of their existing workload, and without  
333 training or support. Also, translators and interpreters may even be affected themselves  
334 by whatever crisis is ongoing.

335         Embedding translation into communication strategies within emergency  
336 planning is part of the solution, like any other element that can be considered and  
337 included in emergency plans as part of the ‘the process of preparing systematically for  
338 future contingencies, including major incidents and disasters’ (Alexander, 2016b, p. 2).  
339 This could involve pre-translated, pre-subtitled, pre-audio described materials in the  
340 languages understood by the local communities to be part of early actions. To achieve  
341 this, language translation needs to be part of pre-crisis emergency plans that will include  
342 the development of resources to enable affected-communities to interact with disaster  
343 managers and humanitarian organization. The ‘so-called “disaster cycle” refers to the  
344 phases of resilience building, preparation, emergency response, recovery, and  
345 reconstruction’ (Alexander, 2016b, p. 23). Our contention is that translation can play an  
346 important role towards *preparedness*.

347         Including translation as a component in emergency planning would have  
348 multiple benefits. With increased access to timely and accurate information in a

349 language that can be (better) understood, lives and well-being can be protected.  
350 Moreover, the considerable economic costs of dealing with crises could be reduced. The  
351 EU H2020 Work Programme noted that the environmental and socio-economic impact  
352 of disasters and crime and terrorism on the population amounts to average annual losses  
353 of roughly 25% of the global GDP and 5% of the Union's GDP, respectively. According  
354 to the UNISDR, the 2013 central European floods alone resulted in losses of US\$18  
355 billion. In the foreword to the World Atlas of Natural Disaster Risk (Shi and Kasperson,  
356 2015), the then UN Special Representative of the Secretary General for Disaster Risk  
357 Reduction, Mrs Margareta Wahlström, stated that economic losses as a result of  
358 disasters continue to rise. It is estimated that in the past three years, losses due to  
359 disasters have exceeded \$100 billion. In 2005, the UK Department for International  
360 Development put forward a policy briefing document arguing that investment in risk  
361 reduction is more cost-effective than just response actions when crises occur (White *et*  
362 *al.* 2005). To shift from managing disaster to the proactive prevention of risk, with  
363 possible reductions in the cost of disasters, multilingual communication needs to take its  
364 proper place in the list that normally includes supplies, medicine, infrastructure and  
365 technology.

366         Steps can be taken to incorporate translation into emergency planning. A logical  
367 starting point is to ensure that it is a concrete and explicit part of emergency response  
368 policy. The lack of reference to translation in policy or guideline documents is  
369 unsurprising, given that there is not even agreement in policy documents on what core  
370 terms such as vulnerability, capacity, and resilience mean. Gaillard (2010) discusses  
371 how these core terms in DRR are often interpreted differently, depending on whether  
372 the policy makers are active in the domain of climate change, development, or DRR. He  
373 believes that huge efforts are required to close the gap between these domains as well as

374 between practitioners and scientists. Given conceptual differences at that level, it is not  
375 hard to understand that translation hardly figures in policies relating to disasters and  
376 crises. Expert terminology and the lack of preparedness in sourcing specialist translators  
377 can be a deadly combination. An example of language needs from the local community  
378 is given by Field (2017, p. 340) through her discussions with local groups. The failure  
379 to evacuate appropriate regions before the landfall of Typhon Yolanda in the  
380 Philippines partially rests on a lack of appropriate translation based on local cultural  
381 needs: ‘while the two are scientifically different phenomena, it was acknowledged that  
382 had the threat of the storm surge been likened to that of a tsunami (for a coastal  
383 population hit by a wave, the impact would be similar), the coastal regions would have  
384 seen higher evacuation rates, particularly due to familiarity with the 2004 Indian Ocean  
385 tsunami and the more recent 2011 tsunami in Japan’.

386         There is an urgency to identify best practices and to provide new insights for, or  
387 indeed create, recommendations for crisis translation policy for national, European, and  
388 international agencies that regularly work across borders and across languages, with a  
389 view to reversing inequalities across language communities and promoting fairness of  
390 access to information. This approach will be especially important in the context of new  
391 migration patterns and policy requirements for Europe. Crisis communication literature  
392 emphasizes the difficulties when trying to communicate with those who are the most  
393 vulnerable, e.g. the elderly, disabled, children, or those with low literacy levels. Dealing  
394 adequately with these challenges must be within the scope of crisis translation into the  
395 future, when, in many societies with migrant populations, first generation migrants will  
396 represent large communities in the care homes and their linguistic skills may not meet  
397 their communicative needs.



398           There is some evidence that high level, national policies (e.g. FEMA, 2016;  
399 NHS, 2015; Cabinet Office, 2012) provide for language provision for limited-  
400 proficiency speakers, but more empirical data on the ways in which translation is  
401 understood in these policies is required (O'Brien *et al.*, 2018), not to mention how  
402 policies are implemented.

403           Contending that crisis translation must be considered in relation to cascading  
404 disasters, we opt for an activist approach. Viewing the definition from the point of view  
405 of emergency planning, research into crisis translation needs to explore the roles of  
406 language in all the phases of a disaster, including during the 'normal' phase in which  
407 resilience is built up. Alexander (2016a, p. 14), discussing emergency planning, reminds  
408 the reader that '[a] crisis is a sudden, intrusive interruption of normal conditions with  
409 potentially adverse consequences. "Normality" is defined here as the average of  
410 conditions over a protracted period in which things function acceptably'. If CALD  
411 communities are being supported by intercultural mediators (Belpiede, 1999; Casadei  
412 and Franceschetti, 2009), interpreters, or community translators (Taibi, 2011; Taibi and  
413 Ozolins, 2016) to access information in *normal conditions*, surely this confirms that  
414 such needs will persist, in fact be exacerbated, in crisis situations. We suggest inverting  
415 the research priorities, so that by building up data, resources, and technology, these can  
416 be better deployed in the response and recovery phases. Just as other specialist skills  
417 receive training to operate in emergencies, linguists ought to receive training to provide  
418 support in crises and to create valuable expertise in handling language needs by being  
419 embedded in crisis management practices. Translation, interpreting, cultural mediation,  
420 and relationships between different language communities that enhance effective  
421 communication in crisis connecting linguistic sub-groups to the broader society need to  
422 be considered as part of the preventive measures that prepare residents for emergency

423 response (Federici, 2016). A good example is the initiative described by Clerveux *et al.*  
424 (2010) where a Disaster Awareness Game (DAG) is developed to help increase hazard  
425 awareness among school children in the Caribbean Community and Common Market  
426 area. This multicultural area demands a multilinguistic approach to risk communication.  
427 Clerveux *et al.* (ibid.) argue that children are an appropriate target for the DAG because  
428 it is an investment in future disaster preparedness, but also because children of  
429 immigrant families are a conduit of information between school and home. They show  
430 awareness of the need for accessibility of the game, mentioning simple language and the  
431 potential for translation. Nevertheless, the game itself, as represented in the paper, is in  
432 English, which still falls short of truly serving multilinguistic needs. Another good  
433 example is discussed in Shackleton (2018); New Zealand Red Cross worked with  
434 members of CALD offering them translation training in order to contribute to a project  
435 to increase awareness of emergencies affecting the Wellington region. In this project,  
436 under-resourced language combinations saw CALD members develop a basic  
437 understanding of translation and linguistic resources to describe natural hazards in the  
438 local area through languages other than New Zealand's main languages (English and Te  
439 Reo Maori). These are good illustrations of how translation can be embedded in  
440 practices of risk reduction; the CALD members involved in the project would not be  
441 professional interpreters in case of a response, but they could contribute to circulating  
442 information in translations (written texts, texts written to be read, radio or TV  
443 broadcasts) to allow CALD communities to attain information in a language they  
444 understand and in a format accessible to them. The example has limitations, however, as  
445 it does not entail a feedback loop seeking to find out from the CALD communities what  
446 information they would like to have and which formats are most appropriate.

447           Written, oral, and multimodal communication channels are used at different  
448 stages of a crisis, with different audiences. Only early phases of crises automatically call  
449 for oral interpreting; preparedness activities and reconstruction phases after a crisis are  
450 more likely to call for translation, if there is an awareness of language needs. These are  
451 broad differentiations: empirical data to identify how municipal, regional, or national-  
452 level policies connect CALD needs with emergency planning is required. The data need  
453 to have a cross-border as well as a local dimension to make sense of the needs of CALD  
454 communities; often the data on ethnographic and linguistic background may be  
455 collected for other reasons (census, electoral rolls) and these data could help identify  
456 existing needs and create the premises (databases, leaflets, technological resources) to  
457 develop language support for the time when it is needed. Data accuracy, assessment of  
458 real language competences, distance between rural and urban needs, and budget are  
459 among the obvious obstacles to developing crisis translation resources. However, this  
460 complexity can no longer be a sufficient justification for a reactive mode to deal with  
461 the language barrier, because cross-referencing such data with other well-known  
462 datasets on hazardscapes, risks, and models derived from statistical data can be done as  
463 part of disaster prevention measures. Interpolating these existing data would create  
464 more valuable resources than what can be put together in the middle of a response.

465           The role of translation in recovery, reconstruction, and preparation phases  
466 (intended as learning from activities just completed during the response phase) has not  
467 been studied much either. This point begins to be appreciated also in the crisis  
468 communication literature:

469           In other words, to date, transnational corporations, political institutions, disaster  
470 relief organizations, and other actors involved in cross-cultural crises and  
471 communication have almost no evidence-based and well-established guidelines  
472 they can use to organize or coordinate international crisis communication or to

473           develop culture-sensitive crisis communication strategies or messages (instruction,  
474           adjusting information, etc.). (Schwarz *et al.*, 2016, p. 6)

475   Taking the most cynical of arguments, even if all the preparations are never going to be  
476   needed, the benefits of involving CALD communities in preparedness strategies would  
477   at the very least lead to more inclusive societies.

## 478   **Conclusions**

479   Crisis translation should be viewed from the point of view of reducing vulnerabilities  
480   and providing efficient communication that would reduce costs if/when a crisis erupts.  
481   Feeble yet slowly-growing is the voice of cost-effectiveness of investing in  
482   preparedness, as in the Communication of the European Commission of 23 November  
483   2017:

484           A fully integrated approach to prevention, preparedness, and response to disasters  
485           in the Union and its Member States is urgently needed. We know that investment  
486           in prevention saves lives and livelihoods; it needs therefore efficient targeting to  
487           disaster risks. (EC, 2017)

488           Evidence of failings in crisis communication is plentiful and usually categorised  
489           under ‘issues of communication’; reasons for avoiding these failings are compelling  
490           (Greenwood *et al.*, 2017), translation is considered as a ‘perennial hidden issue’  
491           (Crowley and Chan, 2011, p. 24; IFRC 2018, p. 103), yet its inclusion in emergency  
492           planning (and studies thereof) remain minimal and alternatives of plain or clear  
493           language are still offered as adequate solutions, but are blind to the needs of those who  
494           have very limited or no competence in the ‘language’ in question in the first instance  
495           (see Strayhorn *et al.* 2012, for example), who cannot read, see, or hear.

496           In this context, we highlight the rationale for demanding evidence-based  
497           investigations into the impact of the language barrier on communication in crisis

498 situations. We need to understand authentic training needs to support linguists (intended  
499 here as anybody with some knowledge of more than one language) who may need,  
500 want, or be co-opted to operate as translators in rare-language combinations when they  
501 are not professionally trained. We need to identify beforehand the needs of local  
502 populations in relation to existing capabilities to deal with multilingual contexts and to  
503 identify ways of developing additional capabilities. We need to seek a better use for the  
504 skills, technologies, and existing data on translation to be used in planned and  
505 sophisticated ways rather than as afterthoughts at the moment of dire need. Crisis  
506 Translation, as we propose in this article, is a catalyst research area to develop a  
507 holistic, multidisciplinary, and comprehensive understanding of the role of  
508 communication in multilingual crisis situations, so as to better address the necessity for  
509 accommodating language needs in crisis situations, thus lessening the impact of the  
510 language barrier in cascading crises.

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513

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<sup>i</sup> See UNISDR, <https://www.unisdr.org/we/inform/terminology>. Accessed 21 November 2018.

<sup>ii</sup> See <http://www.gdacs.org>. Accessed 21 November 2018.